UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/1997/61
13 May 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1997
Geneva, 30 June-25 July 1997
Item 7 (a) and (b) of the
provisional agenda*

REPORTS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SUBSIDIARY BODIES: ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS

Consumer protection

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report, submitted in compliance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/53, reviews progress achieved in the implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection. It notes the steps that have been taken by Governments at the national level, as well as regional and international cooperation, to promote consumer protection.

The report highlights the results emanating from regional conferences/seminars held over the past two years in the African and Asia and Pacific regions, and makes a number of recommendations for the consideration of the Council concerning the further implementation of the guidelines - including calling for closer cooperation among the concerned organizations of the United Nations system - and concerning the encouragement and strengthening of the broad coalition and partnership existing between the United Nations, international consumer organizations, donors and host Governments in this area. It is also suggested that, based on the results achieved at regional conferences and seminars, an interregional expert group be convened to develop guidelines on sustainable consumption patterns.

* E/1997/100.

97-12665 (E) 030697

/...

CONTENTS

	Paragraphs	Page
INTRODUCTION	1 - 4	3
I. IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION	5 - 49	4
A. Progress at the national level	5 - 16	4
B. Regional and international cooperation	17 - 25	7
C. The United Nations system	26 - 46	9
D. Non-governmental organizations	47 - 49	13
II. THE GUIDELINES FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PATTERNS	50 - 56	14
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	57 - 59	16

INTRODUCTION

1. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1995/53 of 28 July 1995 on consumer protection, urged Governments to continue their efforts to implement the guidelines on consumer protection, including by creating appropriate legal frameworks and establishing means to develop, implement and monitor policies and programmes for consumer protection. The Council also recognized the role of civil society, in particular non-governmental organizations, in promoting the implementation of the guidelines. And noting the recommendation of the Commission on Sustainable Development that the guidelines for consumer protection be expanded to include guidelines for sustainable consumption patterns,[1] the Council requested the Secretary-General, in cooperation with the development funds and programmes of the United Nations, the regional commissions and other relevant organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, to continue to provide assistance to Governments, at their request, in implementing the guidelines for consumer protection, to elaborate guidelines in the area of sustainable consumption patterns, taking into account the work undertaken in other intergovernmental forums, and to examine the possible extension of those guidelines into other areas. Finally, the Council requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to it at its substantive session of 1997 on the implementation of the resolution; the present report has been prepared in response to that request.

2. The guidelines for consumer protection, which were adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 39/248 of 9 April 1985, represent an internationally accepted regulatory framework that serves as a basis for the elaboration and strengthening of national policies and legislation in the area of consumer protection. They are intended to protect citizens as consumers through the implementation of a set of principles of fair and reasonable standards covering physical safety; the promotion and protection of consumers' economic interests; standards for the safety and quality of goods and services; distribution facilities; redress; and education and information. They also promote international cooperation in this area.

3. Since the adoption of the guidelines, vast changes have taken place in the global marketplace that make it necessary to assess the impact of the guidelines, not only to ensure that intended results have been achieved but also to assess the relevance of the guidelines in the light of new economic trends. The globalization of financial markets and liberalization of trade, the growing interdependence among countries, the emergence of borderless economic spaces and deregulation in many areas of economic activity have transformed the world economy, and are creating new dynamics in the functioning of the international markets that directly affect the consumer.

4. The present report reviews the progress achieved in the period between 1995 and 1996 at the national, regional and international levels in the implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection. It covers activities undertaken by Governments, the programmes, funds and organizations of the United Nations system, and other intergovernmental organizations in implementing the guidelines. It also reviews activities undertaken by civil society, in particular non-governmental organizations, concerned with issues of consumer

protection. In this context, progress towards the extension of the guidelines to the area of sustainable consumption patterns and other areas is reviewed, and recommendations are made for future action to expand the scope of the guidelines.

I. IMPLEMENTATION OF MEASURES FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION

A. Progress at the national level

5. The role of Governments in the protection of consumers in the modern market remains vital, in particular in the areas of policy-making, legislation and the development of institutional capacity for the enforcement of consumer law. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolutions 1988/61, 1990/85 and 1995/53, has encouraged Governments to provide a legal framework and maintain a strong consumer policy for the protection of consumers.

6. In countries where Governments are initiating action for consumer protection, the guidelines define an essential point of departure for elaborating policies and legislation in order to protect the consumer in such areas as health and safety, access to goods and services, and measures for redress. In other countries, the guidelines generally continue to serve as an instrument to assist Governments in identifying areas where further supportive actions are necessary for the protection of citizens as consumers.

7. In the period under review, a number of Governments have reported that they have made use of and cited the guidelines as a framework for their efforts to develop and strengthen consumer protection policy and legislation. The action undertaken includes the establishment of ministries and offices concerned specifically with issues of consumer affairs; the formulation of national consumer policy and relevant laws and acts; the elaboration of competition law; the elaboration of consumer education programmes and the dissemination of consumer protection information; and the promotion of participation by consumers' organizations in aspects of the decision-making process in areas of consumer protection.

8. Some countries have reported the existence within their Governments of specific ministries and/or ministers for consumer affairs. These include Sweden, Estonia, and Trinidad and Tobago, while other countries, such as Norway, Cyprus, Slovenia, Belarus, Denmark and Mexico, have established departments and/or offices concerned solely with consumer protection. A commission for the protection of the consumer has been established in Peru, and Portugal has established a consumer institute and a national consumer council for promoting and safeguarding consumer rights and executing measures aimed at their protection. In Australia, the minister of the Government responsible for small business and consumer affairs, with the assistance of an advisory council of consumer affairs, is responsible for issues related to consumer protection, and government ministers responsible for consumer affairs have also been appointed at the state and territory levels. In addition, Australia has established a ministerial council on consumer affairs, which includes the ministers responsible for fair trading, consumer protection laws, trade measurement and credit law at the state and territory levels. Zimbabwe has established an

institutional structure for consumer protection, involving several ministries and departments.

9. Generally, Governments continue to indicate the usefulness of the framework of the guidelines for consumer protection in the consideration of the development of consumer policy and law and related codes for the protection of the consumer (Cyprus, Mexico, Ecuador, Italy, Estonia and Lithuania); the adoption of state policy on consumer protection (Belarus); the incorporation of elements of the guidelines (physical safety, consumers' economic interests, redress measures) in consumer protection law (Peru); and as an important point of reference in the encouragement of activities in this area (Germany). Australia has developed policies for consumer protection at the national, state and territory levels in line with all the elements of the guidelines. Portugal has established a comprehensive legal system on consumer protection through the adoption of a law which includes provisions to protect the users of essential public services, such as water, electricity, gas and telephone services. Slovenia is currently in the process of preparing a law on consumer protection, and the Government of Oman is in the process of establishing guidelines for consumer protection.

10. A number of countries are promoting activities related to the elaboration and enforcement of competition law and policy, and are addressing consumer protection issues in that context. Australia has established a competition and consumer commission, and is implementing provisions of competition policy at the state and territory levels with a view to developing a competitive economic environment with uniform rules and rights for consumers and business. Zimbabwe has enacted a competition law, and it is envisaged that a trade competition commission, to be established in the near future, will be administering such a law. Cyprus is implementing a competition law, while Bolivia is currently preparing a code on the workings and functioning of markets that will include issues of consumer protection and competition. Ecuador, Italy, Mexico, Estonia and Lithuania are undertaking work in the formulation of related competition policy and law.

11. In such countries as Cyprus, Ghana, Sweden, Lithuania, Denmark and Mexico, a number of activities have focused on the formulation and/or strengthening of standards, regulations and rules on food and products safety. In Australia, activities have included the introduction of strategies to reduce or remove physical hazards associated with consumer products, the enhancement of product safety standards and their enforcement, and the introduction of credit and industry codes, including dispute resolution schemes.

12. Governments have also carried out educational outreach programmes, including the use of media and advertising and the organization of symposia, conferences and seminars. A two-day symposium on food security and nutrition was organized in Trinidad and Tobago in commemoration of the World Consumers Rights Day. A programme for the dissemination of information to consumers was developed in Peru on that occasion, and Belarus commemorated the event under the slogan "Safe products for all". Training activities, including seminars and workshops on issues of consumer protection, have also taken place in Peru.

13. The European Conference on Consumer Education in Schools, held at Stockholm in 1993, established the European Network of Consumer Educators, which has since started the publication of its newsletter Nice-Mail. The Internet is being used as a medium for disseminating consumer education. For example, the Norwegian Consumer Council has a home page on the School Network of the Norwegian Centre for Educational Resources, and Australia is considering the use of this mechanism for the dissemination of information on product recall provisions. Related courses have been introduced in the Norwegian secondary school system, and also at the primary level in Denmark. Belarus expects to develop in 1997 a pilot programme on "consumer literacy" for students in vocational and technical schools, and also at intermediate and higher educational institutions. The bulletin Consumption with Care, published in Peru, provides consumer information on such issues as consumer rights, availability of goods and services, and redress measures.

14. Activities related to product testing and dissemination of relevant information through the media have been supported directly by Governments or through consumer organizations in Slovenia and Belarus, among other countries. Hotline telephone services have been established in Belarus to provide advice to consumers as well as institutes for consumer protection. Measures for facilitating redress to consumers also include the use of telephone services (hotlines), for example in Peru, where this service accounts for over three fourths of consumers' complaints. The United States of America is pursuing consumer protection activities in the areas of telecommunication, protection of personal data and telemarketing.

15. Activities for promoting international cooperation include the provision of advisory assistance and the sharing of information and training. Trinidad and Tobago provided on-the-job training to officers of other member States of the Caribbean Community on issues of consumer protection, and Australia, through support provided to the South Pacific Consumer Protection Programme, has assisted in the development of consumer legislation and promotion of consumer organizations in South Pacific island States, such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Samoa and Tonga. Australia has promoted training activities through the exchange of staff involved in issues of consumer affairs with Canada and New Zealand.

16. Governments recognize the important role of civil society, in particular non-governmental organizations, in promoting consumer protection. In a number of countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana, Togo, Ecuador, Mexico, Italy, Slovenia, Belarus and Portugal, collaborative relations have been developed between government offices and consumer associations. Germany has continued to support consumer organizations that focus on consumer information and advice in the food sector, energy conservation, and environmentally sound consumer behaviour. Support has also been provided to consumer organizations in the organization of training seminars for the dissemination of consumer information, the elaboration of programmes on consumer education in schools, the protection of consumers on issues of redress and solution of complaints. The Government of Zimbabwe has continued to support a related non-governmental organization working in this area, thus creating an enabling environment for such organizations to undertake many activities. These include consumer education and awareness programmes, assistance in the monitoring and enforcement of

standards (food, quality of goods and services), and in the formulation of legislation, such as contracts, and the establishment of dispute solving mechanisms, among others. A consumer education centre has been established in Belarus on the initiative of consumer organizations. In Cyprus, consumer associations have been participating in consumer consultative committees to enhance the role of the consumer in the decision-making process related to consumer issues.

B. Regional and international cooperation

17. The Economic and Social Council, by its resolution 1995/53, recognized the important role of civil society, in particular non-governmental organizations, in promoting the implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection. The Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat has worked closely with the most prominent non-governmental organization in the area of consumer protection, Consumers International, both through its headquarters and its regional offices in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America, in activities designed to promote the implementation of the guidelines.

18. A salient feature of this collaboration has been the organization since early 1987 of a series of regional seminars and conferences on consumer protection. These seminars and conferences assist in bringing together all the actors from both the public and private sectors concerned with issues of consumer protection for exchange of ideas and experiences, help to disseminate information on developments, and establish the groundwork for legislative and institutional development in the various regions on this area.

19. During the period under review, Consumers International, in collaboration with the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development and with the support of the European Union and the Government of Zimbabwe, organized the Africa Conference on Consumer Protection, which was held at Harare from 28 April to 2 May 1996. Government officials from over 35 African countries, consumer leaders and experts from countries of the region, and members of the international community concerned with issues of consumer protection attended the Conference. The Conference launched the Model Law for Africa, designed to protect the African consumer and serve as a guide for African Governments in their efforts to develop appropriate policies and legislation and enforcement mechanisms in this area. Ghana has already indicated that the Model Law for Africa is being studied for use in the elaboration of its national consumer protection policy.

20. The Conference recognized the important progress being achieved in the promotion of the guidelines for consumer protection in Africa. It stressed the need for the countries of the region to strengthen measures to enact and enforce consumer protection policies and legislation, since there were still 16 countries in the region that did not have consumer organizations or bodies concerned with issues of consumer protection. That was particularly important and urgent in the light of the growing globalization and liberalization of the world economy, and the potential impact of those trends on consumers at the national level. A number of areas that required the special attention of the

countries of the region were identified, in particular health, safety, access to basic services and measures for redress. The Conference also examined the extension of the guidelines into other areas, such as sustainable consumption patterns.

21. In January 1997, Consumers International, through its regional office for Asia and the Pacific, and the Consumer Unity and Trust Society of India organized an international conference at New Delhi on the theme "Consumers in the global age", in cooperation with the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development and with the support of the European Commission, the Governments of India, the Netherlands and Sweden, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Other non-governmental organizations, such as Consumers Union and the Freidrich Ebert Foundation, also provided support for the conference. The event was the second meeting on consumer protection for the countries of the region; the first, a regional seminar, was held at Bangkok in June 1990.

22. The conference at New Delhi was attended by over 200 participants from Governments, intergovernmental organizations, international and national non-governmental organizations and experts from over 30 countries. The conference reviewed the progress achieved in the implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection in the countries of the region, and considered the issue of the extension of the guidelines into other areas. Progress was made towards the elaboration of a model law for consumer protection for the Asia and Pacific region. At the conference, an Asia and Pacific consumer protection network of government officials of the countries of the region was established, which a number of countries have already joined.

23. In Europe, the European Commission, apart from providing support for the above-mentioned conferences and seminars, continues to adopt legislation, regulations and directives in the field of consumer policy. The Commission's priorities for consumer policy in the period 1996-1998 included 10 broad areas of action, among which are efforts to improve the education and information of consumers, the protection of consumers' interests in the supply of essential services of public utility, increased consumer representation, consumer aspects of financial services, the improvement of consumer confidence in foodstuffs, and the encouragement of a practical approach to sustainable consumption.

24. A number of countries, in particular Norway, Sweden, Italy, Slovenia, Estonia and Cyprus, have stressed the importance of the role of the European Commission in consumer protection. Italy, Norway and Sweden have taken steps to adapt their national policy on consumer protection to European Union laws, regulations and directives, and Slovenia has indicated that it will adapt its law on consumer protection, currently under elaboration, to European Commission directives. Italy's approach to its national consumer policy is based almost entirely on European Commission guidelines. Germany has considered the directives of the European Commission on various issues of consumer protection, in particular on general food safety issues, insurance legislation and regulations on the establishment of contracts, and will adjust its national law on competition to European Union competition legislation. Sweden is working actively for strengthened consumer influence within the Union, while strongly supporting current work within the Union in connection with distant sales, price

information, transborder payments, guarantees, the solution of disputes and questions related to foodstuffs. Sweden and Norway are active participants in the eco-labelling programme within the European Union, under which, so far, some 900 products have been awarded the Nordic Swan marking of excellence/quality.

25. The majority of member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have institutional and regulatory frameworks in the field of consumer policy that generally cover all the elements of the guidelines for consumer protection. The OECD Committee on Consumer Policy follows closely the implementation of the guidelines in OECD member countries.

C. The United Nations system

26. Consumer protection issues are receiving increasing attention from the organizations of the United Nations system.

27. The Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development has not only developed a network of collaboration and partnership with non-governmental organizations and relevant intergovernmental organizations but also works closely in this area with concerned organizations of the system, such as UNDP, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the regional commissions and the specialized agencies, with a view to ensuring the effective use of its limited resources to maximize the impact of its activities. More specifically, in the area of consumer safety, the Department continues to collaborate with World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme/International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals in the publication of the Consolidated List of Products Whose Consumption and/or Sale Have Been Banned, Withdrawn, Severely Restricted or not Approved by Governments. The List consolidates all information on products harmful to health and the environment, and contains information on regulatory actions taken by 94 Governments on over 700 pharmaceuticals, agricultural and industrial chemicals. In addition to WHO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) also participate in this activity. The List is widely used by Governments and non-governmental organizations in their efforts to consider the scope for regulatory measures.

28. UNCTAD has continued its activities for the promotion and protection of consumers through its advisory services and technical assistance programme. The Set of Multilaterally Agreed Equitable Principles and Rules for the Control of Restrictive Business Practices (A/C.2/35/6, annex), adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 35/63 of 5 December 1980, was revalidated by the Third United Nations Conference to Review all Aspects of the Set in 1995. In addressing the area of competition law and policy, UNCTAD promotes innovative activities by industry leading to a greater variety of goods and services, and lower prices. With the financial support of UNDP and bilateral donors, UNCTAD provides advisory services to national competition law agencies, organizes workshops and seminars, and prepares technical studies and reports on issues of competition policy and law. These programmes, directed in particular to

developing countries and economies in transition, also assist in adapting to the process of globalization and liberalization of trade.

29. At its ninth session, held at Midrand, South Africa, in 1996, UNCTAD gave prominence to consumer protection issues (see TD 378, paras. 29, 43, 91 (III) and 97 (ii)). Thus, related work of UNCTAD will focus on the examination of the relevance of consumer protection and competition to development, and will support strategies for promoting national competition. UNCTAD and the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat will work closely in gathering information on the extent to which countries have elaborated consumer protection legislation, as well as on existing arrangements for the implementation of such legislation.

30. The UNEP Code of Ethics on the International Trade in Chemicals encourages high levels of ethical conduct for private-sector parties engaged in the production and management of chemicals, by setting out principles governing standards for the environmentally sound management of chemicals in international trade.

31. In the period under review, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) focused on the elaboration of standards for perishable produce. The ECE intergovernmental party on the standardization of perishable produce and quantity development, in cooperation with the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, has elaborated commercial quality standards for perishable produce. The standards facilitate trade between exporters and importers, and also provide information on health and general consumer protection criteria. Workshops and training seminars on commercial quality standards have taken place in Eastern European countries to ensure adequate product quality control and promote the awareness of consumers. Standards on processed, semi-processed and raw foods, including food hygiene and additives, pesticide residues, contaminants, labelling and presentation, as well as methods of analysis and sampling, have also been developed. Current negotiations on the protocols on nitrogen oxides and related substances of persistent organic pollutants and heavy metals increasingly address human health-related questions. In addition, action has been started to ban or restrict the use of 15 toxic pesticides and other chemicals with implications of health risks.

32. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) continues to collaborate with Consumers International in the area of consumer protection, including consumer legislation, trade, economic integration and consumer protection, public services and sustainable consumption. ECLAC participated in the third Consumers International regional conference for Latin America and the Caribbean on economic integration and consumer protection, held at Sao Paulo in October 1995, and it also participated in the first European and Latin American Consumers' Congress, held at Madrid in November 1995, which dealt with issues of legislation, development and consumer protection.

33. The World Food Programme (WFP) observes specific recommendations of the Codex Alimentarius Commission in the area of food safety and security. All shipments of food, including international and local purchases of food products (which constitute approximately half of WFP's annual food purchases), follow

these recommendations. WFP also meets the Commission requirements in terms of the marking and labelling of commodities it distributes.

34. WFP has disseminated its logistic experience on distribution facilities and quality control in a number of countries through training of counterpart staff involved in transport and storage of commodities, and in the establishment and improvement of harbour and warehousing facilities, distribution centres and transport systems.

35. In cooperation with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), WFP has carried out nutrition education campaigns targeted to vulnerable groups of population, in particular children, including schoolchildren, pregnant women and nursing mothers. WFP follows established guidelines for the distribution of milk products while promoting breastfeeding practices.

36. FAO pays particular attention to the protection of consumers against health hazards and economic losses associated with contaminated and/or adulterated foods.

37. The joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, comprising 156 member countries, has continued to formulate international standards and codes of practice on a wide range of food commodities, as well as recommendations on issues related to food safety. Generally, those standards are adopted and incorporated in national legislation. The Uruguay Round of multilateral trade agreements also recognized those standards as the benchmark for quality and safety requirements for food in international trade. The Commission promotes the adoption of open date marketing and ingredient labelling, and it has adopted a code of ethics related to the trade of food.

38. During the period under review, a number of joint FAO/WHO activities have taken place: an expert committee on food additives carried out evaluations on the toxicity of food additives, its technical uses, and specifications for its identity and purity, and provided advice on the acceptance levels of dietary intake of food additives, contaminants, and residues of veterinary drugs in animal products; an expert consultation on the application of risk analysis to food standards provided advice on the use of risk analysis principles in food standards development; a similar consultation on risk management made recommendations on the application of risk management in food safety matters; and a meeting on pesticide residues evaluated the toxicity of pesticide residues in food, and provided recommendations on the acceptable levels of those residues within the context of international trade. Those recommendations represent the basis for related rules established by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

39. In addition, a joint FAO/WHO consultation on the preparation and use of food-based dietary guidelines and an FAO expert consultation on nutrition education for the public produced a number of recommendations on issues of nutrition education. The resulting publication, Get the Best from Your Food, has been translated into several languages and adapted for use in a number of countries, and two resource books, Human Nutrition in the Developing World and Food, Nutrition and Agriculture for African Teachers, under publication, should assist in training activities in nutrition, consumer protection and food security. An FAO meeting on the integration of consumer interest in food

control, for the countries of the Latin America and Caribbean region, adopted recommendations to enhance the participation of consumer representatives in the decision-making process related to food quality control, consumer education and awareness.

40. The UNEP/FAO programme on prior informed consent with respect to agricultural, industrial and consumer chemicals, in which 125 countries participate, is expected to become legally binding in the near future. In accordance with the provisions of the programme, an international shipment of a chemical or pesticide that is banned or severely restricted or is known to be causing health or environmental problems will not proceed without the explicit agreement of the designated national authority in the importing country. Any decision banning or severely restricting the import of a chemical must also apply equally to production for domestic use.

41. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) programme on risk reduction in the agrochemical industry, comprising the regional network for pesticides in Asia and the Pacific, and the Afro-Arabic network for risk reduction in agrochemicals development, has included the development of guidelines and the adoption of international standards on agrochemicals production and use.

42. UNIDO, in cooperation with UNICEF and UNDP, also promotes the use of iodized salt for the elimination of iodine deficiency disorders; data collection, quality control and control of the iodine content of salt have been emphasized. Attention has also been given to work related to pharmaceuticals. A project entitled "Integrated development of national pharmaceutical industry", conducted in the Syrian Arab Republic, included the provision of advisory services for the elaboration of related policy and legislation, including consumer protection. A project entitled "Development of the pharmaceutical industry", conducted in Thailand, included the establishment of the Pharmaceutical Technology Service Centre of Thailand. The Centre has assisted 125 pharmaceutical enterprises in obtaining certification on good manufacturing practices, is assisting the pharmaceutical industry in the procurement of export licences, and is also cooperating with organizations of the United Nations, such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), WHO and the World Bank.

43. A joint venture between UNIDO and the International Vaccine Institute of Seoul, Republic of Korea, included two global training workshops on quality assurance, good manufacturing practices and quality control for vaccine manufacturing, and management of vaccine manufacturing enterprises. These workshops, held at Bandung, Indonesia, and Beijing, respectively, also addressed consumer protection issues, such as adverse reactions to immunization and more generally of customer satisfaction. Workshops on good manufacturing practices in the pharmaceutical sector and on validation of pharmaceutical manufacturing processes took place at Montreal and at Bogota, respectively, and were aimed at introducing quality management systems.

44. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) revised the code of conduct for the regulation and operation of computer reservation systems, which was subsequently adopted by the ICAO Council. The code provides, inter alia,

for the safeguarding of the privacy of personal data of passengers, including the requirement that air passengers using computer reservation systems for booking and ticketing flights be kept informed of code-shared flights that involve two or more operators.

45. ICAO has published a manual on the regulation of international air transport to promote the dissemination of information and advice for air transport users and shippers. The publication, entitled "Policy and guidance material on the regulation of international air transport", provides information on international air fares and rates, including rules and conditions associated with scheduled passenger fares, information on baggage allowances and charges to passengers, and related redress and compensation measures.

46. As recommended by the ICAO conference on international air transport regulation of 1994 (see ICAO/Doc. 9644), the work of ICAO will continue to take into account the promotion of consumers' economic interests.

D. Non-governmental organizations

47. As noted above, the collaborative relationship established between the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat and civil society, in particular non-governmental organizations concerned with issues of consumer protection, such as Consumers International, continues to be strengthened. Without the leadership provided by Consumers International and the close United Nations cooperation with it that has developed over the years, it would not have been possible to carry out the international programme of regional seminars and conferences within existing resources.

48. Currently, discussions are being undertaken on the formulation of a memorandum of understanding between Consumers International, the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat and UNCTAD to strengthen international assistance for consumer protection policy and legislation through a programme of joint action. It is intended that Consumers International, the Department and UNCTAD will cooperate, inter alia, in the promotion of national consumer protection law and consumer protection policy formulation, including issues covered in the guidelines for consumer protection, the Midrand Declaration on technical cooperation in this area (see para. 29 above), the development of national and international competition law, and research on consumers issues, including sustainable development and consumption patterns.

49. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), a non-governmental organization serving the world cooperative movement and bringing together more than 200 national and international cooperative organizations from nearly 100 countries, devotes nearly 25 per cent of its resources to the consumer sector. ICA holds consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Consumer cooperatives, in providing goods and services specified by consumers, contribute to the promotion of consumer awareness and education. Generally, such organizations contribute to achieving consumer rights at the national and international levels. In particular, through its subsidiary body, the

International Consumer Cooperative Organization, issues of standards of safety and healthy environment, access to goods at fair prices with reasonable variety and choice, access to information on goods and education on consumer information are being advanced by the cooperative movement.

II. THE GUIDELINES FOR CONSUMER PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

50. The issue of sustainable consumption patterns was raised in a global context at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held at Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, where it was embodied in chapter 4 of Agenda 21.

51. A more environmentally conscious consumer public, combined with increased interest on the part of industry in providing environmentally sound consumer products, is an important dimension of sustainable consumption. Consumer consciousness of the link between consumption and the environment has increased. But although consumers may be more aware of their greater responsibility in the relationship between environment and consumption patterns, that awareness can only be translated into action if consumers are given the necessary information to make the right choices and thus bring about environmentally sound consumption patterns and lifestyles.

52. The role of Governments in shaping consumption patterns, in particular in countries where the public sector plays an important role in the economy, continues to be of utmost importance. A number of Governments have reported on the progress being made in that area of work. Germany has promoted projects in the field of environmental advice to foster environmentally oriented product information and awareness aimed at achieving environmentally sound consumer behaviour. Norway has developed a project entitled "Green Household Budget", by which information and advice on purchasing and use of products towards sustainable production is provided to consumers. Norway has also hosted two international conferences on sustainable production and consumption: a ministerial round table held at Oslo and an international conference on sustainable consumption, held at Lillehammer. As a result of those meetings, the Norwegian Research Council has established a research programme on sustainable production and consumption. Also, the Governments of Brazil and Norway organized a symposium on sustainable production and consumption patterns at Brasilia from 25 to 28 November 1996. The results of the meeting concentrated on the policy options available for making patterns of consumption and production more sustainable. The meeting agreed that consumption and production patterns is an issue that has the common interest of and deserves additional international cooperation between industrialized and developing countries.

53. The United States of America has been promoting the achievement of sustainable consumption through a public outreach and education programme of its Environmental Protection Agency. This office also maintains an Internet site on recycling and the use of recycled products. The Consumers Office of Mexico promotes the dissemination of information to consumers on consumption and environmental protection, the adequate use of energy, recycling measures, and

carries on training programmes for sustainable development. An international forum on the theme "Consumption at the end of the millennium" dealt with issues of consumption, consumers organizations and advertising and media.

54. Sweden considers that the extension of the guidelines for consumer protection should be part of consumer policy at the level of the European Union, and also within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers and OECD. OECD considers the area of sustainable consumption as an important field to be included in relevant guidelines for consumer protection. Currently, an overview of member countries' activities on issues concerning sustainable consumption patterns is being prepared by OECD.

55. As noted earlier, with the rapidly changing international economic environment, consumer organizations have expressed the need to review the guidelines for consumer protection and to expand their scope to cover new areas where consumer protection is desirable. Interest has been indicated, for example, in extending the guidelines to include issues of public utilities in such areas as telecommunication and transport services, where there may be a growing need to protect consumers' interests. Another area of concern embodies the service sector, in which insurance, banking and investment, as well as lending and borrowing conditions, have all been transformed by the use of new technology and more competitive markets.

56. The Africa Conference on Consumer Protection (see paras. 19 and 20 above) considered possible guidelines for issues of basic services, including public utilities (health, water, electricity, gas); financial services (credit reporting with privacy protection, regulated rates and terms, disclosure of costs and terms of credit); and consumer representation (representation in trade negotiations, setting of products standards, and the need for mechanisms for consumer participation in decision-making processes). The Asia and Pacific conference on the theme "Consumers in the global age" (see paras. 21 and 22 above) identified elements for guidelines on sustainable consumption; the active participation of consumer groups in the elaboration of guidelines and in the decision-making process; the introduction of environmental taxation or incentives and disincentives on natural resource-depleting production and consumption activities; the dissemination of verifiable information to consumers on the development of advertising codes and standards; and the regulation and verification of environmental claims. The areas of financial services, new technologies, especially in communications, and consumer services were also cited as requiring new policy provisions. Other suggestions emanating from the recent symposium on sustainable production and consumption patterns, held at Brasilia in 1997 (see para. 52 above), include the need to integrate sustainable development at the level of government decision-making with a view to ensuring that macroeconomic policies for liberalization and deregulation promote environmental improvement. Also, the importance of the role of Governments as major consumers was stressed, in that Governments can help shape markets through their use of goods and services and the incorporation of environmental criteria into procurement policies.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

57. As indicated in the brief overview presented above, considerable progress has been made in the implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection in terms of measures undertaken for the protection of the consumer at the national level and strengthening cooperation at the regional and international levels. There has been a surge in public awareness of consumer issues, especially in terms of the sustainability of consumption patterns and the need to protect the interests of consumers in a globalized world economy. The consumer movement is gaining momentum in all regions, and public policy is being strengthened in response to those developments. But, much remains to be done, and action by Governments is essential. At the regional and international levels, the role of the United Nations system of organizations, with the support of member States and in collaboration with major groups, such as non-governmental organizations, is equally important for mobilizing support and providing assistance in adopting measures at the national level for the protection of consumers. The success of collaborative activities - such as the series of regional conferences and seminars promoted by the United Nations in collaboration with members of civil society (including non-governmental organizations, such as Consumers International), donors and host Governments - points to the need to maintain and strengthen such collaboration for the cost-effective use of limited resources in further work.

58. The Council may wish to recommend continued national and international efforts to ensure the effective implementation of the guidelines for consumer protection by all the actors concerned, including Governments, as well as to ensure continued close cooperation to that end among the organizations and bodies of the United Nations system, other intergovernmental organizations and major groups, in particular non-governmental organizations.

59. In the period ahead, the elaboration of guidelines to cover sustainable consumption patterns will require particular attention. The outcomes of the regional conferences held over the past two years, the work undertaken by intergovernmental organizations, such as OECD and the European Union, and initiatives by individual countries have all prepared the ground for a concerted effort to expand the scope of the guidelines for consumer protection to cover sustainable consumption patterns, as well as other areas, such as new information systems, telecommunication, transborder trade and consumer services, including financial services. As a first step to that end, the Council may wish to call for an interregional expert group meeting to elaborate recommendations for guidelines on sustainable consumption patterns, for submission to the Council, at its substantive session in 1998, through the Commission for Sustainable Development.

Notes

[1] See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), para. 45.